

# Atoms for Peace: A Future after Fifty Years?

On December 8, 1953, President Dwight D. Eisenhower, in a speech to the United Nations General Assembly, announced his Atoms-for-Peace proposal. He sought to promote nonproliferation by offering the benefits of peaceful nuclear technology to those who renounced nuclear weapons. The proposal was also an arms control measure, as it foresaw the United States and other nuclear-weapon states providing excess nuclear material to an international authority that would use it for peaceful rather than military purposes. This vision of regulated nuclear supply was less dramatic than the foundations of the failed Baruch Plan, but it was enthusiastically received around the world. It laid the framework for the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) and the Treaty on the Nonproliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT)—the cornerstones of the international nuclear nonproliferation regime.

As we approach the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of this historic speech, nuclear energy has become a significant element in the global generation of electricity. It has been disappointing compared to the great expectations of the 1950s through the 1970s, although some believe it is now on the verge of a “second coming.” While nuclear arms are being dramatically reduced, the very nature of nuclear arms control seems to be changing. There are large questions about how arms control will develop in the future. Nuclear proliferation remains a serious threat, but is not spreading to the extent believed at the time of the Atoms for Peace proposal, and the specter of nuclear terrorism seems a greater concern today than at any time in the past. Depending upon one’s perspective, Atoms for Peace has been praised or pilloried, or both, as the cause of the situation we now confront in each of these areas.

It is an appropriate time to reassess the legacy of the proposal and the regime elements it underlies, and to look ahead to assess the relevance of Atoms for Peace for dealing with nuclear energy, nonproliferation, arms control and terrorism issues over the next 50 years.

To undertake this assessment of Atoms for Peace’s past and future, a two-day meeting in December 2003 will be held at the Woodrow Wilson Center for International Scholars. This meeting, co-hosted by G. Peter Nanos of the Los Alamos National Laboratory, Lee Hamilton of the Wilson Center and Timothy Sullivan of the College of William & Mary, will provide a balanced assessment of the future bounded in an analysis and appreciation of the past.